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Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 9 (2010) 450–455

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**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

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WCLTA 2010

## A qualitative study on school development: perceptions of people involved in change process

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate a school within the context of school development processes. In the study, semi-structured interviews were used and the head-teacher, a teacher, and a member of (PTA) were interviewed. Findings of the study suggest that there are many internal and external factors that affect school's capacity for change and development. It was concluded that the school culture, leadership and collaboration with insider and outsider stakeholders significantly contribute to whole school development. It is recommended that schools should adopt a development plan and work with all parties to keep up with change in education.

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*Keywords:* School development; perceptions; qualitative study;

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### 1. Introduction

The worldwide developments in information and technology in recent years, and accordingly changing demands have brought about new considerations in education. The changes have brought new education-related paradigms into agenda, and necessitated the reconstruction of educational systems (MNE, 2007).

The alternation in information technology, social and cultural life have changed the definition of “school”, and urged the schools as well as the education process for conversion. As a result, there has been a changeover from traditional school to “learning school”, because in today's world, the individual's demands and expectations are consistently changing. It seems possible for the schools to survive in the future only if they adopt “learning organization” concept in this era in which individual and organizational learning come into prominence (Senge, 2000; Çelik, 1997; Drucker, 2000).

As the researches related to the performance of our education system are analyzed; according to the 3rd Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study's (TIMSS 1999) national report, in science achievement, Turkey was ranked 33<sup>rd</sup> among 38 participating countries, and in mathematics it was at 31<sup>st</sup> rank. Similarly, at the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) held in 2003, Turkey was ranked below most of the member countries of OECD. The findings prove that there is a lot to be done for our education system. These

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findings also require handling our schools and the processes concerning the school from a different point of view, and examination of schools development together with their efficiency levels.

Seen from this respect, we are confronted with the “efficient school” concept, the educational aims and functions, the internal qualifications and organizational arrangements of which are different from those of other schools. One of the basic characteristics of the “efficient school” is the fact that it has an improved education process and setting. In this process, the information, skills and the behavior change anticipated to be gained by the students are all planned in advance; and all the educational activities are realized at the school in the education process and setting (Baştepe, 2009).

According to Ostroff and Schmitt (1993) the “efficiency level” of a school is assessed by the students’ educational success level. However, Purkey, (1985) claims that the success and efficiency of a school is determined by the students’ knowledge, skills, and the growth in their behaviors (cited in Baştepe, 2009).

Considering the factors such as headmaster and deputy directors, teachers, students, parents, school climate and culture, training schedules, environment, physical structure of the school, setting for education and education technology that build up the efficiency of the school (Şişman, 1996: 96–115), the efforts of related people and the vision school are focal point in order to improve the quality and the performance of the school; perpetuate the development attempts; and provide a planned school development process.

## **2. Aim of the study**

The aim of this study is to investigate a school, handled within the context of school development processes, in all respects, especially including administrative operations, learning and social processes; and put forward its developmental structure and vision. In the study, the questions such as “How the school development is perceived by the related persons”, “what kind of studies are carried out in this area”, “what kind of studies are planned to be implemented in the future”, “what are the confronted difficulties in school development”, and “what are the solution to overcome barriers for development” have been investigated.

## **3. Method**

In the study, “case study” method was adopted since it was aimed to anatomize the administrative activities run in the school, the learning conditions and the other variables. The study was carried out with the three participants who were playing different roles within the school. The head-teacher, a teacher, and a member of Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) were interviewed. In accordance with the ethics of the research, the names of participants are kept anonymous. In the study, semi-structured interviews were used. Findings are presented in a narrative way.

The primary school focused in this study were opened in 2007 and currently there are 24 male and 20 female totally 44 teachers employed in the school. Total 820 students (from grade 1 to grade 8) attend the school and there are 30 classrooms available for teaching and learning and in 18 of classrooms have a projection machine connected to a computer.

## **4. Findings**

In this section, findings from interviews are presented one by one in a narrative way. The head teacher’s perceptions and views about school development and its processes are analyzed first. The teacher’s and member of PTA’s view will follow this and conclusions from these views are drawn at the end.

### *4.1. Analysis of the head-teacher’s interview*

Analysis of the interview carried out with the head-teacher of the school illustrates that, there are many internal and external factors affect development of school. The head teacher mentioned six important elements in this process.

#### 4.1.1. Head-teacher' perception of school development

The head teacher defined the school development as “...doing all the activities in accordance with the aims determined before hands and the cooperation of those who involved in education process”. Moreover, the importance of self development of every person in school was emphasized. In order to ensure the school development success, mutual understanding, respect, communication and trust were highlighted to be essential. The head teacher noted that have a school development plan which is being applied, in this plan it is clear for every teacher when and what to do and all the documents regarding this plan are available.

He also mentioned that their focus of attention is related with learning environment and social development by saying: “Our priorities are to educate; well, happy, self confident, curious and creative members and to ensure this students to have good jobs”.

#### 4.1.2. Leadership strategies

The head-teacher defined the effective leadership as “A leader is someone who can create enthusiasm, direct people very well, determined, create confidence, and know human relations well.” He tries to be flexible without being too strict to the rules and reads books on management strategies for his own development and gives importance to innovations and researches He also explained that he has some principles for effective leadership. His some of the principles as follows:

- It is important to establish a founding culture, to create cooperation and to enable the effective working condition. So I try to motivate my teachers, to smile all the time and most important of all I try to create the sense of trust
- In general I show that I value both teachers and parents by asking their opinions.
- We discuss rules and working principles of school in the teachers' meetings to ensure common implementation
- I interview at least 10 students each day and try to solve their problems.

#### 4.1.3. Vision: holistic development

All the activities conducted by school management for students development within the education process have been examined; In order to motivate and reward the successfully students the school management take them to the cinema and theatre, present them books, give test take part in projects as a whole, organize weekend courses. Apart from this it has been mentioned that they are constantly in touch with the problematic and misbehaving students and that they are trying to change their behaviors by constantly following them.

#### 4.1.4. Relationships with people

According to the head-teacher the institutional relationship is quite well and he tries to behave equally against everybody because he believes that the fairer a manager is more successful he becomes. In addition he mentioned that the relationship between the school and parents is well, especially there are some conscious parents to take care of school and that they come together to work at school at the weekends. He also added that they take the parents seriously and in this respect they arranged a parents meeting room at school which is the first example in the city. Moreover his expectations from both staff and students are very high.

#### 4.1.5. Future ideas

The head-teacher explained his future plans to improve the quality standards of the school. His ideas for the future as follows:

- We must work efficiently and make both students and teachers believe in success,
- We must create an atmosphere depending on mutual trust at school
- Leader must be model and he reflect his enthusiasm the school
- The physical facilities of the school must be developed and school must be turned into a place where students and teachers can study happily and with pleasure
- Students' educational and leisure activities must be enriched and developed
- Technology must be used during classes and real life examples must be carried into the classes

- For school rules classroom atmosphere must be taken into consideration because the sense of discipline of the school is believed to begin in class.

#### 4.2. Analysis of the class teacher's interview

As a part of the study, the interview conducted with a primary school teacher who is also among the school development staff. Different to the head teacher, interviewed class teacher concentrated on different concept of school development (i.e. communication, personal and professional development, learning environment).

##### 4.2.1. Class-teacher's perception of school development

The teacher defined his perception of school development as *"Coming of a school into prominence together with all its variables such as social, cultural activities and state of success"*. He remarked that the environment and climate of the school, and the student's profile influenced the school development. The teacher stated that they have dynamic, successful and young staff; that the school administration welcomed their opinions; and that they would be more successful in the future. According to him some teachers are reluctant, and especially the parents are not interested in school. *"Especially parents of the unsuccessful students put forward several excuses, only if the student is successful they visit the school. It is partially up to the teachers to attract the parents who have key role in the success of the students."*

##### 4.2.2. Communication in and out of school

The teacher emphasized that the teachers had close relationships among themselves and with the school administration; that there was not any conflict between the parties; and that this warm relations would echo to the success of the school in the near future.

Indicating his out-of-school educational activities, the teacher mentioned that because of the facts that the school was located in outer suburb, that there is not a profile of conscious parents, they often held parents' meetings supported by the school management, and they guided the parents about child nutrition, hygiene, the negative effects of TV, and matters of learning. The teacher pointed out that all these decisions were taken by the board of teachers. Also the teacher noted that they especially observed the students of primary education out of class, and when any negative behavior was confirmed, the parents were contacted immediately in order to prevent these negative behaviors.

##### 4.2.3. Personal and Professional Development

The activities related to his personal and professional development were analyzed, and it was concluded that he was closely following the developments in ICT and education in order to be successful in his profession. He expressed that he was attending diction, calligraphy and computer courses. For the professional development, he attaches the importance to collaboration in the school. In this sense, he gets assistance from the guidance service and his colleagues, if necessary. The teacher pointed out that he was self critical in the class; that sometimes he requested his students to criticize him keeping their names anonymous, and that he took these critics into consideration and compensate his deficiencies in accordance with the critics for his professional development.

##### 4.2.4. Learning environment

The teacher explained their principle as *"lesson is learned during the course"* which is written on the notice board in the classroom. He said that lessons were supported by the projector, and the visual learning contributed much to the success. It was observed that some weekdays an individualized training was given to those lagging behind the courses or having difficulty in learning. The teacher expressed that he mentally prepared himself for the course, tried to be a good model to students in the class, and never teach the lesson by sitting on his chair. The teacher perceives the school successful in terms of exams. He commented that *"Although the school was serving for only two years, great results were received from SBS (level test) and scholarship examinations."*

#### 4.2.5. Suggestions for the future

The teacher suggested that the school administration, teacher, and the parents had to have close relations, and be in coordination; otherwise the individual efforts of either teacher or the school administration would not be sufficient. *“Especially for the growth of students, the parents must be invited to the school more frequently; in order to attract the parents, the teachers should emphasize the positive behaviors of the students rather than the negative ones, because parents do not want to hear another negative behavior of their child.”*

#### 4.3. Analysis of the member of PTA's interview

The member of PTA concentrated on different themes in his conversations. Findings of the member of PTA's interviews are presented below.

##### 4.3.1. Perception of the member of PTA of school development

In his conversations it was concluded that the member of PTA perceives school development in terms of its physical standards and conditions. He defined school development as *“I believe that a developed school has all departments in place such as play garden, sports hall, computer labs, music and art room and required teaching and learning materials as well as a nice appeared school building”*.

He explained that as parents they have worked with the school to improve physical appearance of the school. He pointed out: *“When the construction of the school building was finished, there were several deficiencies; we led to remove all these defects. Sometimes, I gathered people around me or parent who knows these works, and get them work in the construction of the building. Because this a duty of humanity”*

##### 4.3.2. Supporting learning

The activities of parent-teacher association related to support for learning process were identified. He said: *“We try to recover the learning-related defects by informing the school administration, provide all the necessary teaching materials for the teacher; sometimes have insights about students' education level and compare it with that of other schools by asking questions to them.”* It was confirmed that they facilitated the students to use library and the computers, namely internet, and that they supported the students financially to be able to attend private courses. He stated that they had established a model class in order to support education and teaching process. As for the procurement of the materials, he said *“if necessary, I buy the material with my own money, because if I put a map in the classroom, many people will benefit from it”*

##### 4.3.3. Social, cultural, health related issues and educational activities

The general activities of the parent-teacher association were identified. The member of PTA mentioned that although the school was newly established, they had formed badminton and athleticism teams; the students participated in social activities such as table tennis, chess, and folk dance contests, and were rewarded with cups.

Except for the activities mentioned above, here are the other activities:

- In order recognize the student in every aspects (living with whom, his interests, state of health, blood group, etc...), a student file including all private information was opened, and this application was adopted by all the teachers.
- The teachers are trying to inform people what the duties of parent-teacher association are.
- A board was hung to the wall of common room to let the teachers improve themselves for their union. *“if they are organized and acquire the information, they can activate the union, and if the union works, good works will be set forth”*.
- They give the children toilet training indirectly by putting toilet papers into toilets. *“As long as the kids broke toilet paper holders, we fixed new ones, and eventually they learn not to break, and they got used to it.”*
- For the students' personal and educational growth, starting from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade computers were put in the classrooms (in the first year it was kept under lock and key, but the following year the class was not locked).

- In order to let the students have a say in the process, a request box in which they can put their opinions, suggestions, and complaints was introduced. P-3 indicated that they checked all the complaints, opinions, and suggestions during the meetings and evaluated them with the administration.
- The workers in the school are controlled; their needs or problems are inquired. In order to help them work more efficiently, their opinions are delivered to the school administration.

## 5. Conclusions

As a result of this study carried out to define what internal and external variables in learning affecting the process of school development are; and how are implemented in school, it is stressed that for an effective school environment, it is necessary to appreciate the ideas of everybody taking part in the process; that effective leadership and administrative skills, and togetherness of parents-teacher- administration are of a great significance.

It is identified that the physical development of the school is attached great importance; serious efforts are made towards the solution physical deficiencies; necessary planning are done for this issue; and all these efforts will contribute to the school culture in the coming years.

The facts that the relations of school administration with the staff (teachers and workers) are satisfactory; that there is a good cooperation among teachers; that some staffs are available sustaining school development, and in this respect duty distribution is done are among other striking results of the study. However, it is confirmed that some of the teachers are generally effective in class activities but they don't make sufficient contribution to the process.

According to the interview with headmaster, it is defined that the absence of informal relations at school and indifferent manners of parents about the process are some of the handicaps.

As a conclusion, the school is quite new. It focuses on the success in learning process, and generally the learning staffs are stressed. In this respect, it seems close to Effective School paradigm; however, due to the fact that the school studied regards classroom learning process and quantitative success; cares about the headmaster's administrative effects and collaboration of administration-teacher-student-parents; pays attention to students' social and cultural development, it is determined that the school have employed a developmental approach which is closer to Hopkins' (1996) School Improvement paradigm.

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